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ABSTRACT

The effects of child gender and teacher experience on the intrusions of teachers into young children's play were studied. A classroom of 15 children (mean age 34 months), which was supervised by a lead teacher, graduate assistants, and undergraduate student teachers, was observed. Teacher intrusions into the children's play were coded as requests, distractions, commands, or corrections. Results indicated that verbal requests, distractions, commands, and corrections from teachers were more frequently directed at males than at females. Experienced teachers provided more commands and corrections than did less experienced teachers. (Author/PCB)

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Social Play in Toddlers: Teacher Intrusions

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Teacher Intrusions

Abstract

The effects of child gender and teacher experience on the intrusions of teachers into young children's play were studied. A classroom of 15 children (mean age 34 months), supervised by a lead teacher, graduate assistants, and undergraduate student teachers was observed. Teacher intrusions into the children's play were coded as requests, distractions, commands, or corrections. As predicted, verbal requests, distractions, commands, and corrections from teachers were more frequently directed at males. Contrary to prediction, experienced teachers provided more commands and corrections than less experienced teachers. Implications of this type of early socialization and the reasons for differing teacher behaviors were explored.

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Play is widely accepted as the medium through which the child explores, experiments with, interacts with, and learns about the physical and social world. Piaget (1962) thought that the child, if left to her own devices, would seek an optimal state of intellectual stimulation, continually seeking understanding. Child's play in a group setting is a vehicle for both cognitive development and learning social behavior. The philosophy of many early childhood educators is that the teacher is a facilitator of this child-guided process, not directing the play but making stimulating materials available and assisting the child when necessary for the child's physical or emotional well-being.

Personal characteristics of adults have been shown to impact on the early social play of toddlers. Minton, Kagan, and Levine (1971) noted that mothers who had not attended college were markedly more prohibitive and intrusive in their interactions than were college-educated mothers. Indeed, high school educated mothers interrupted their toddler's play an average of 12 times per hour while college educated mothers interrupted play 7 times per hour. Mothers were also more controlling than teachers in a preschool setting (Hess, Dickson, Price, & Leong, 1979).

Adults respond to infants as young as six months differently as a function of the child's perceived sex. For example, in a series of studies (Will, Self, & Datan, 1976; Smith & Lloyd, 1978), adults were observed interacting with an actor infant that they had been led to believe was either male or female

(regardless of the actual sex of the infant). Adult subjects gave feminine sex-typed toys such as dolls to infants they thought were girls and hammers to perceived boys. These adults also offered more vigorous physical stimulation in reply to the gross motor actions of perceived boys. Similarly, differences in teacher responses to children as young as 13 months have been related to child's gender; and toddler responses to teachers and peers have also been related to toddler's gender by 25 months (Fagot, Hagan, Leinbach, & Kronsbert, 1985).

Expectations of teachers may also influence their behaviors. For instance, Serbin, O'Leary, Kent, and Tronick (1973) found that teachers were more likely to respond when boys were aggressive than when girls were; teacher responses to boys were louder and more directive.

Teachers intrude in a child's play in order to regulate the child's behavior. For example, teachers may intrude in order to gain compliance with a rule, to facilitate a change in activity of the group, or to insure a child's physical or emotional well-being. The aim of this study was to examine teacher intrusions into children's play as a function of child gender and teacher experience. It was expected that teachers would intrude in the play of boys more often and more directively than that of girls. Another purpose of the study was to describe and compare the distribution of various forms of vocal intrusion (requests, distractions, commands, or corrections, each coded as appropriate or inappropriate) in boys' and girls' play. Requests and distractions were considered less directive,

commands and corrections as more directive forms of intrusion. The teacher experience element of the study was provided by the presence in the classroom of teachers with three different levels of experience: the lead teacher, a graduate assistant, and undergraduate student teachers. These levels provided the comparison for the effects of teacher experience on intrusion in play. The expectation was that less experienced teachers would intrude in play more frequently than more experienced teachers.

Method

Subjects

Observations were made of a classroom of 15 children (mean age of the children: 34 months). Seven of the children were female. The lead teacher, two graduate assistants, and several undergraduate student teachers (all female) were observed interacting with the children. Observation time was collapsed across categories of teacher experience for four hours each, a total of 12 hours of observation.

Procedure

Prior to the beginning of the school session, three wireless microphones were attached to the lead teacher, graduate assistant, and one of the student teachers in the classroom. Only one of these three microphones emitted signals to the receiver in the next room. Because the microphone picked up children's voices and background noise, as well as the target teacher's voice, and because there was a high level of activity in the room, only one teacher's interactions could be coded at

one time. Two or three observers categorized all verbal intrusions into the play of the children. The coding categories used were: requests (e.g., "Please keep the dishes in the kitchen area"), distractions (e.g., "Here is a truck for you to play with"), commands (e.g., "Come choose a book to read"), and corrections (e.g., "We save our outside voices until we are out on the playground"). Corrections were differentiated from commands in that they concerned behavior changes about familiar rules in the classroom, e.g., "Use your walking feet" to remind a child not to run in the classroom. All observations took place in the first hour of the session, during free play inside the building.

Results

Observers categorized the various teacher vocalizations and also attempted to copy verbatim what was said and to whom the comment was directed. Only observational sessions in which the mean reliability across the behavioral categories was above .80 were included. Mean reliability for the teachers ranged from .72 to .91. Reliability across behavioral categories was as follows: requests, .78; distractions, .85; commands, .88; and corrections, .86.

Table 1 shows the data for the three classes of teachers. Due to the nature of the data, nonparametric analyses were employed to examine the data. Kruskal-Wallis one-way analyses of variance revealed that gender of the child significantly affected teacher distractions (chi-square approximation = 4.35,

$p<.04$) and corrections (chi-square approximation = 3.97, $p<.05$).

Insert Table 1 about here.

The teachers' behaviors were also examined in accordance with the various children in the classroom, since it appeared that three males were eliciting most of the behaviors directed at the males. Indeed, three males did elicit 70 percent of the teachers' intrusions in male children's play. Similarly, three females elicited 66 percent of the teachers' intrusions directed at female children.

Teachers engaged in intrusions at the rate of one intrusion every two minutes. As Table 1 shows, the lead teacher was more likely to intrude in the children's play, especially by giving commands. An examination of means, using a Tukey's studentized range test, revealed that the lead teacher gave significantly more commands than the graduate assistants or the student teachers (3.49, $p<.05$).

Discussion

Both child gender and teacher experience influenced the number and type of intrusions in this group of 34-month-old children. While gender findings were in the predicted direction (males more than females), the effect of teacher experience was contrary to predictions.

Gender

Sixty-eight percent of the verbal intrusions were directed

to six of the 15 children, three males and three females. Whether the focus on the behavior of these six children was a function of their activity level, their behavior, or expectations of the teachers is unclear. An attempt was not made to record all the behaviors of the children.

As expected, the teacher's judgment about the nature of the child's activity and the character of her subsequent response were strongly influenced by the child's gender. Teachers tended to verbally intrude to a greater extent into the play of males, and they were also more directive of males. Sixty-three percent of the intrusions were directed to males. Teachers also limited the behavioral choices of males more than those of females. Intrusions were more likely to be commands and corrections with males, but requests and distractions with females.

The effects of gender based differences in preschool teachers' interactions with children have not been studied in terms of their relationship to later elementary school behavior. However, at the elementary school level, males are far more often referred for emotional, behavioral, and learning problems than are females (Serbin, O'Leary, Kent, & Tronick, 1973). It may be that the interactions of preschool teachers with males sets up a behavior pattern with negative results for some children at the elementary school level. The gender based preschool differences need further study. It could be that the gender based expectations and interaction styles of preschool

teachers are limiting the future behavioral options of both genders.

Teacher experience

The child care laboratory in which the study was conducted emphasized free play, since it is assumed to facilitate cognitive and social development. A number of activities are provided each day; teachers are urged to let the children choose their own activities and to intervene only when a child's safety is endangered, if a child is disturbing other children, or when a child needs attention. However, teachers in this study intruded in the play of the children 30 times per hour, an average of once every two minutes. Minton, Kagan, and Levine (1971) noted that mothers of two-year-old children interrupted their children's play every six to eight minutes.

The lead teacher intruded in the children's play significantly more often and more directively than the graduate assistants or the student teachers. The unexpected finding may have several explanations. Less experienced student teachers may be reluctant to confront a willfully disruptive two- to three- year-old, and they may wait for the lead teacher to act. Student teachers directed more requests and commands to females than to males, the only reversal of the predominant trend to direct more intrusions toward males (see Table 1). These less experienced teachers appeared to be more willing to directly confront female children, who are more compliant and less likely to challenge them. Student teachers exhibited more indirect behavior management (distractions) with males and reminded them

of known rules (corrections) more often than they did females.

Another possible explanation of the unexpected finding is that classroom management strategies from teacher education programs socialize student teachers to take a humanistic perspective, which advocates permissiveness, trust toward students, and a supportive attitude (cf., Kearney, Plax, Sorensen, and Smith, 1988). Adopting a classroom management scheme of permissiveness may leave student teachers ill-equipped to meet the disciplinary challenges of a group of two- to three-year-olds. The lead teacher, however, as the most consistent caregiver in the classroom and the person ultimately responsible for classroom management, may be more aware of and respond more rapidly to disruption by certain children.

Other issues

Finally, although not part of this study, a potentially important point is the influence of space on the children's play and the teachers' behavior. (For a review of this literature see Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983). For example, the amount of open space in the classroom may have encouraged children to run between activity centers and contributed to the necessity to repeatedly regulate the children's behavior. Rearranging the classroom might have prevented the amount of running that the children engaged in and obviated the necessity for many of the disciplinary efforts. Hence, the number and types of intrusions by teachers might be an artifact of the specific classroom in which the study was conducted. The influence of the environmental variable, "classroom arrangement", on the types of

free play engaged in by children may have had a significant influence on teacher behavior.

The care-giving adult in child care provides a supporting and encouraging context for the development of children's play behaviors. An important aspect of that context is the caregiver's sensitivity to the developmental needs of the children and to the nurturance of the children's cognitive and social explorations. The importance of the teacher-child relationship on the social development of young children, the effects of gender upon teacher behavior, and the value of play in social and cognitive development underscore the need for further study of the factors influencing teacher intrusions into young children's play.

Table 1

Number of Intrusions Per Hour by Child Gender

Teacher	Requests		Distractions		Commands		Corrections	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Lead Teacher	3.50	2.75	1.75	1.00	11.50	3.50	12.50	4.00
Graduate Assistant	3.25	1.75	1.75	0.00	5.50	3.25	8.00	4.00
Student Teachers	0.50	2.50	1.75	1.50	3.75	5.00	7.75	6.25
Total	7.25	7.00	5.25	2.50	20.75	11.75	28.25	14.25

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